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THE PROBLEM OF INTELLIGENCE

Story Behind Raid on Son Tay Prison

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WASHINGTON—When Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird testified that the Administration had no way of knowing for certain that American prisoners would be found at Son Tay last November, he was understating an intelligence problem that gives American military planners the shivers.

Among all the other problems of fighting the war in Indochina, the problem of divining the intentions, plans and movements of the North Vietnamese has been the toughest.

That problem made the commando raid on the small compound only 23 miles west of Hanoi one of the biggest gambles in American military history—a gamble decided on by President Nixon for trying to get captured Americans out of North Vietnam but also for what one high Administration official has called "transcendent reasons."

Officially, the Son Tay raid was conducted for one reason only—to rescue American prisoners. Transcendent reasons are admitted only for the deepest background. But since the Administration admitted they existed, others have been speculating on what they might have been.

Idea No. 1: The American military machine, caught in a "dirty, grubby war" that no one wants, scarred by the tragedies at My Lai and stories of other atrocities, condemned at home and facing serious dissension in the field, needed an act of heroism to boost its morale.

Idea No. 2: The Nixon Administration, having helped create a prisoner-of-war lobby since grown impressively vocal, felt the political need to respond to its demands that something be done for the 339 Americans living under cruel conditions in North Vietnam.

Idea No. 3: The President had to show the North Vietnamese that they could not count on using the prisoners as hostages for a political settlement embarrassing to the United States [illegible] steps as drastic as invading North Vietnam to secure their freedom.

The President's gamble failed. To understand why, follow it from its inception late last May in a little-known office on the ninth corridor of the Pentagon's first floor.

Office 1E962 is marked "SACSA." The acronym stands for Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities."

It was SACSA that conceived, planned, organized and oversaw the Son Tay operation.

SACSA is both a military officer and the office he directs. The officer, at the time the Son Tay raid was conceived, was Brig. Gen. Donald Dunwoody Blackburn, a 54-year-old infantryman whose career has such great storybook qualities that it has been the subject of a book and a movie—"Blackburn's Headhunters."

As a first lieutenant, Blackburn arrived in the Philippines in October, 1941, to become an adviser to the Philippine army. The following April he evaded capture by the Japanese on Bataan Peninsula, disappeared into the jungles of northern Luzon, organized a small guerrilla force of primitive tribesmen who were just beyond the practice of headhunting and fought a backwoods campaign against the Japanese until the war ended.

Blackburn became one of the recognized experts in "special warfare," the military's euphemism for American involvement in protecting friendly governments against incipient revolution.

In 1957, when the 1954 Geneva accords which settled the French Indochina war were being honored mostly in the breach by all involved, Blackburn joined the American military assistance advisory group in South Vietnam to help shore up the Saigon government of Ngo Dinh Diem against the then-budding Viet Cong insurgency.

In August, 1969, after a series of assignments in the United States and Vietnam, Blackburn was named SACSA.

The office was created by President John F. Kennedy early in his administration to systematize the United States' role in dealing with insurgencies throughout the world.

Special Warfare Bible

SACSA's doctrine was originally set out in a three-inch thick volume that became the bible of special warfare. Originally that bible dealt mostly with counterinsurgency.

The early counterinsurgency doctrine was based on the simple premise that American technology—the same know-how that would land a man on the moon and create a machine-aided life of comfort for consumers—would conquer insurgencies.

To gain superiority over a guerrilla who has lived in a region for years, you need only fight him in the dark, provided you can see and he cannot, the doctrine said. So radios were developed to penetrate the jungle canopy, helicopters that fly 80 m.p.h. over areas where guerrillas move on foot were brought in. Heat-seeking infrared sensors for detecting enemy campfires were developed.

The enemy found it relatively simple to deal with Western technology. Learning of the campfire detectors, for example, he simply ordered no campfires could be built within a mile of camp, and that rendered infrared sensors relatively useless.

So the insurgency in South Vietnam, instead of being brought under control, developed into the longest war the United States has ever fought. The few thousand American advisers of the early 1960s grew into a force of over half a million ground troops.

By the time Blackburn established himself in the Pentagon's Room 1E962, counterinsurgency had passed its heyday.

Thinks About Contribution

Last May, as concern over the fate of American war prisoners in North Vietnam was rising throughout the country and the military, Blackburn began to think about what contribution his office could make.

Blackburn studied what was then known of Son Tay and the other known North Vietnamese POW camps and decided that, if prisoners were held at Son Tay, it was the only location where a raiding party could land. The other known prisons are all in downtown Hanoi.

In June, he presented the idea of liberating some American prisoners to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and received permission to conduct a "feasibility study."

"The initial phase started in June," Blackburn told The Times. "We [illegible] on the American prisoners . . .

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